

## September is National Preparedness Month, and it's One Month Closer to Snow: Get Your Vehicle and Survival Kit Ready Now

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No one “plans” to get stuck in the winter when traveling, but I’m willing to bet you either have, or know someone who has gotten stuck in a drift for a few hours, maybe even overnight! It takes just a few minutes to put together a winter survival kit to carry in your vehicle, and you’ll never regret having it if you do become stuck, or just can’t drive any farther because of blizzard conditions. Here are a few ideas, and in the end, we know you will put together what works best for your car size, and the materials you have on hand.



*Photo courtesy of MDT Fort Peck to Nashua Feb 2011*

One of the first things to do is make sure your vehicle is winterized. Know where your block heater cord is, get your extension cord ready for the block heater, have the heating and cooling systems checked out, replace bad windshield wipers, have filters replaced, make sure your lights work, have the exhaust system checked for CO2 leaks, make sure you have good tread on your tires (or have winter tires put on), and consider carrying a sandbag or two in the back of a rear wheel drive vehicle for better traction.

The photos below show the two winter survival kits that we carry in our government vehicles. I personally feel that our huge plastic tote is too big. Most people don’t want something that takes up the entire back end of the SUV or trunk of the car. The smaller backpack on the right is much more manageable, and it’s already put together for you. We found ours online by searching “survival kits” and the costs were generally in the \$25 to \$75 range.



*The giant plastic tote holding all our winter survival gear*



*A ready-made kit we purchased*



The photo above shows the gear we have in our large tote, including: a NOAA Weather Radio with hand crank power option, a tire repair kit, a safety triangle and flares, first aid kit, power bars, paper towels, flashlights and batteries, a cord, small thermal blankets in a package a sleeping bag, and many other smaller items in the backpack.

**Portable Survival Kits:** I came across the portable survival kits shown below at an ag show in Sidney, MT this past winter. The Richland County 4-H kids put them together as a project. You can see they are small, and the red one could easily fit in your jacket pocket.



**A vehicle preparedness kit at a minimum should include the following items:**

Cell phone and charger	Water bottles or container
First-aid kit	High-calorie, non-perishable foods
Extra clothing (hats, gloves, snow pants)	Moist Towelettes/Paper Towels
Ice Scraper	Flares/Whistle to signal for help
Spare Tire	Tool kit - Leatherman

**Additional items you may want to consider including are:**

Blankets/sleeping bags	Battery booster cables or a battery booster
Flashlights with extra batteries	Compass/Road Maps
Extra clothing	Small can and waterproof matches to melt snow
Shovel – portable ones	Small garbage bags and ties
Tow Rope (chains are dangerous)	Small bag of cat litter or sand

**When traveling the northern plains or northern Rockies in wintertime, run through this checklist:**

- ✓ Fuel up and stay above a half tank.
- ✓ Check the road conditions: <http://www.mdt.mt.gov/travinfo/> or call 511
- ✓ Check the Travel Forecast Page. Sometimes the roads are good in the location you are leaving from, but conditions may worsen as you get closer to your destination.  
<http://www.wrh.noaa.gov/byz/state/transportation/index.php?wfo=ggw>
- ✓ Tell someone where you are going, what time you leave, and the route you take to get there. Use the better traveled roads. Then call them when you arrive safely.  
Otherwise, they can alert officials that you are late and perhaps there is a problem.
- ✓ Don't use cruise control on icy roads!

**If you run into problems, keep the following items in mind:**

- ✓ Use a tow rope, not a chain to pull a vehicle that is stuck. Make sure it is no longer than 6 feet. Chains can backlash, and cause serious injuries or death.
- ✓ If a chain is the only available item, throw a heavy jacket or blanket over it before attempting to tow a vehicle out.
- ✓ If you do get stuck, and it looks like you may be in the vehicle for a while,
  - Stay with the vehicle, unless you can clearly see sturdier/warmer shelter
  - Run the engine 10 minutes each hour for heat, and crack the window just a bit
  - Keep the tailpipe clear
  - A hubcap or visor can be used as a shovel
  - Burning oil in a hubcap may allow rescuers to find you if conditions have improved
  - Distress Signal is: Honk your horn for three long blasts, 10 seconds apart. Repeat every 30 seconds.





*Highway 191 South of Malta in February 2004 – NWS Glasgow Photo*

For further information on being prepared for winter in Montana, download the **Montana Survival Guide** from the Montana Department of Transportation and Disaster and Emergency Services, or contact your local Disaster and Emergency Services Coordinator to receive a copy of it.

[http://www.mdt.mt.gov/publications/docs/brochures/winter\\_maint/winter\\_survival.pdf](http://www.mdt.mt.gov/publications/docs/brochures/winter_maint/winter_survival.pdf)